

Susan Martin Maffei & Archie Brennan: TAPESTRY PARTNERS & INNOVATORS

BY REBECCA MEZOFF



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TOP: Susan Martin Maffei, **Nessa Nessa- Winter Moon**, detail.

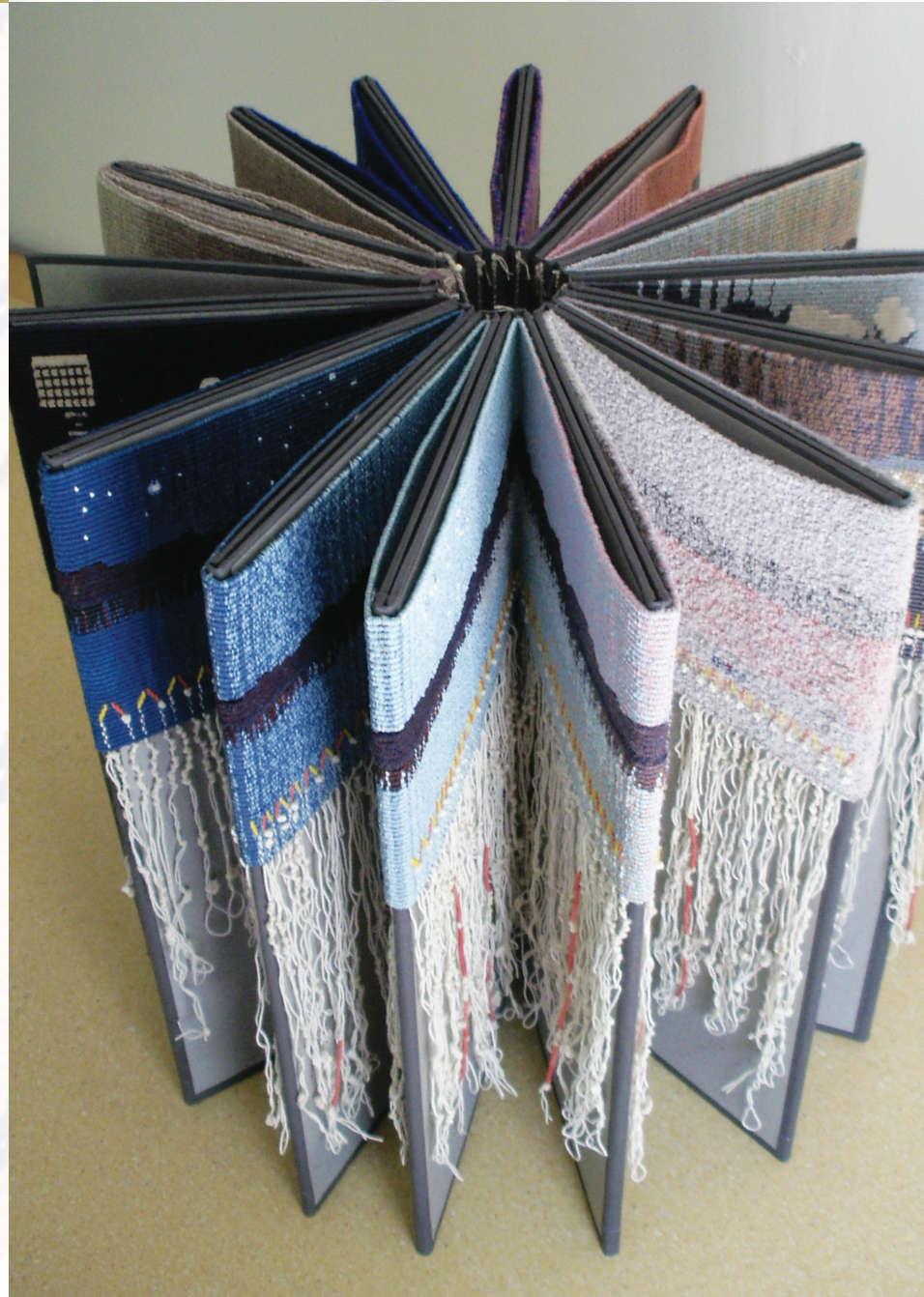
RIGHT: Susan Martin Maffei, **Nessa Nessa- Winter Moon**; 2014; hand-spun multi-selvaged wool warp, indigo dyed silks, Bulgarian silks, hemp, wool, cotton and linen and metallic wefts; Quipu of handspun wool; mount materials are acid free book board and book fabric, acid free French Canson paper and glues; 20 x 252 in. fully extended, (28 panels 20 x 9 in.) and 20 x 9 x 8 in. closed as book.

OPPOSITE PAGE

LEFT: Archie Brennan, **A Hawaiian Island-the Beginnings**; 2010; 23 x 34½ in.

TOP RIGHT: Partners in Tapestry; Susan and Archie working on same loom, different projects. c. 1990

BOTTOM RIGHT: Archie Brennan, **First Meeting. 2nd Version**; 2010; (drawing series 79 from TV, left handed—two actors, separate programs); 30¼ x 20 in.



A typical workday finds Susan Martin Maffei and Archie Brennan working in adjacent rooms on the third floor of their renovated Victorian home in upstate New York. In the self-described chaos of his studio, Archie is finishing his 503rd tapestry, and Susan is moving her loom in search of the best light available for her long day of work.

Susan and Archie share a home and a vocation. As tapestry artists, they have, separately and together, had an immense impact on tapestry as an art form. They met in 1989 at the Scheuer Tapestry Studio in New York City, but their respective careers as tapestry artists began long before that.

Archie grew up near Edinburgh, Scotland. His first experience with tapestry was in 1947 at 16 years of age as he was taking some college classes and met students who introduced him to the Dovecot Studios. He soon began a seven-year apprenticeship there in tapestry weaving. He eventually became the director of the Dovecot from 1962 to 1975 and established the tapestry department at Edinburgh College of Art. Over the course of his career, Archie has continually seeded his ideas about tapestry technique, design, and production all over the world. From his directorship of the Dovecot, he went to Australia where he was instrumental in establishing the Victorian Tapestry Workshop (now Australia Tapestry Workshop) in 1976. In 1984 he moved to the United States, first to Hawaii and then to New York City where he maintained a studio for several decades. He and Susan recently relocated to upstate New York where he continues to weave every day. Archie's work is known for its clean, deliberate, graphic quality and frequent use of wit and humor.

Susan's professional tapestry career began in 1985. She studied with Mary Lane at the Parsons School of Design in New York City; Michelle Misnage in St. Ambroix, France; and Jean Pierre Larochette and Yael Lurie in Berkeley, California. She was an apprentice and a commissioned weaver with the Scheuer Tapestry Studio in New York City and completed three terms of internship at Manufacture Nationale des Gobelins in Paris. Her use of four-selvage weaving, work with memory and narrative, and insistence on working largely free of any cartoon have shifted recent understanding of the way tapestry is practiced in a contemporary form.

Though their tapestry work is done independently, they enjoy a rich collaboration of critical thought about the medium, dialogue about the



history of tapestry over the last few millennia, and they pass on their knowledge in workshops they teach together all over the world.

A DIRECT CONNECTION WITH IMAGE

Tapestry is often compared to three-dimensional sculpture because as the weaver creates an image, they also make the cloth that contains that image. This mode of creation demands a different kind of interaction with the design and execution than a medium of two dimensions such as paint. Both Susan and Archie are interested in creating a direct connection between the image in their minds and the one forming on their looms, unlike the tapestry of the Middle Ages.

By the mid to late 20th century, smaller scale works in tapestry had become more common, and most artists in the medium were artist-weavers. This change is often taken for granted by practicing tapestry artists today, but it was a monumental shift in thought brought about in part by Archie Brennan, beginning with his tenure as director of the Dovecot. He elaborates: "Something about medieval tapestry that has always bothered me is that, so often, the big cartoon for the giant mural tapestry is a painting, and the weavers have to sit down and follow a full-sized painting as it was, not copying so much the paint but copying the effect of the paint. And that troubled me."

He felt that it was important to utilize the creativity of the weavers and to foster collaboration between the artist and the weavers in the workshop.

Both Archie and Susan have studied pre-medieval era weaving styles in contrast to the European reproductive tendency. Archie is fond of Coptic weaving, "That was one thing that opened my mind a great deal in that there didn't seem to be any fancy drawing or design, sometimes they seemed to just weave direct at the loom." And Susan has studied Peruvian weaving and has similar feelings about the immediacy of the art-making process.

AN OPEN JOURNEY UP THE WARP

For the most part, Archie and Susan work with no cartoon at all. Archie says, "Susan and I are very fixed that any cartoon we do is not a completed design to follow. ... [Weaving] is an opening of a creative journey, not a reproductive journey on the loom." Susan also talks about "not using any cartoons and just weaving free on the loom as if it were a piece of paper," which is quite a shift from her traditional Gobelin training.

Tapestry is a medium where it is easy to get caught up in the pick-by-pick detail of the work and lose the big picture. Susan and Archie are advocating a journey of creation which allows fluidity of work and a fresher, more vibrant result in the finished piece. They most frequently weave from bottom to top, creating the image as they move upward and responding in the newest bit to what has come before. After all, you can't go back and paint over what you did at the beginning when you're weaving a tapestry. You have to build the structure from bottom to top, as Susan says, "like a brick wall."



PATTERN IN CLOTH

Both Susan and Archie use pattern as a prominent quality in their work. Susan talks about pattern as being something that is recognizable and comforting to the human brain. Her work is frequently based in memory and narrative. The way she uses pattern in the visual elements of her work, for instance a patterned fabric in a blouse or a bit of wallpaper, she feels is linked to human recognition of pattern. This helps create a connection with the viewer on a very basic level.

Susan's use of narrative extends beyond the rectangular grid often used in tapestry weaving. For example, her work *Nessa Nessa – Winter Moon* can be folded into an accordion book or stretched into a long narrative viewable all at once. The work takes us on a journey through time along the Hudson River recording phases of the moon, constellations, and images of the river. In threads hanging below the weaving, she uses quipu, an Andean method of recording information using knots in string, to record the time of the rising and setting of the moon.

Archie also loves to use pattern in his weaving. He has frequently represented bits of cloth such as tablecloths, bits of lace, and clothing in his tapestries, which are in themselves cloth. "A textile is a cloth, and its presence of *clothness* is always there."

LEARNING THE DISCIPLINE

Susan's classical training at the Scheuer Tapestry Studio and Les Gobelins served her well. It taught her to use the technical skills necessary to be a master tapestry weaver. Speaking about the Scheuer studio where she worked on commissioned and speculation pieces with other weavers, she says, "The advantages to working in a studio like that are that you weave every day, which is the only way to acquire the skill for tapestry. ... Working in the workshop teaches you that you have to sit still for x number of hours in order to do it successfully."

Archie is also a strong proponent hands-on learning. His work ethic, developed over more than 60 years, emphasizes the importance of learning through looking and doing. He has a weekly drawing session with models, a practice he has followed for his entire career. "And the reason for this above all is about me learning how to see, really, how to look," he says.

I WONDER WHAT WILL HAPPEN...

Throughout his career, Archie has put a spotlight on the weaver as artist. In discussing his process he says, "I'm asking a question: I wonder what will happen if I try this?" This spirit of experimentation, which also exists in Susan's tapestry practice, has led them down a long road of exceptional tapestry production and has pushed the tapestry world into new ways of thinking about the medium.

Susan Martin Maffei and Archie Brennan have careers marked by numerous awards, solo shows, and commissions. Their work has been shown in museums, galleries, and private collections all over the world. Notices for current exhibitions of their work can be found on their websites at www.brennan-maffei.com and www.susanmartinmaffei.com.

Rebecca Mezoff is a tapestry artist who loves to teach the magic of tapestry in both online and in-person workshops. www.rebeccamezoff.com

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ABOVE RIGHT: Brennan with loom, 2014

BELOW RIGHT: Archie Brennan, *Once Upon A Summer*; 2010; cotton warp, wool and cotton weft and real buttons; 23 x 15 1/2 in.

OPPOSITE PAGE

ABOVE LEFT: Susan on scaffolding finishing one of her NY Times series, c. 2000

BELOW LEFT: Susan Martin Maffei, *Traffic*; 2001; cotton weft, wool, silk, linen and cotton weft; 80 x 48 in.